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ZHOU ENLAI AND THE END OF UNEQUAL TREATIES

Core Course Essay

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China's rapprochement with the United States of America in 1971-72 represented one of the most dramatic realignments in world affairs since Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union a generation earlier. Nurtured in secrecy and announced to the world via the new medium of television, the visit of the American President to China took allies and enemies alike by surprise. The timing was audacious - the U.S. President was welcomed and feted in Peking, even as American bombs fell on China's socialist neighbor, North Vietnam, and as the Nixon administration confronted bitter domestic opposition at home. But this bold move put an end to the bi-polarity that had characterized international relations for more than 20 years, ushering in a new era of foreign policy possibilities for the major powers.

Zhou Enlai, a leader of the Communist movement in China since the 1920s, and Foreign Minister of the People's Republic since 1949, conceived of his new policy of opening to the United States primarily in response to the Sino-Soviet rift, and the hostile positioning of Soviet armed forces along the Ussuri and Amur borders during the 1960s.¹ But Zhou's policy also had firm roots in his Marxist-Leninist ideology and political experience. Whereas President Nixon, and even more his energetic National Security Advisor, Henry Kissinger, saw the opening towards China as a long overdue corrective, a restoration of the balance of power in the conduct of international affairs,² Zhou could see the move as a tactical one, akin to the long series of "United Front" manoeuvres which he and Mao had practiced during their long struggle for power against the feudal warlords, the Japanese, and the Kuomintang.³ Kissinger might argue that Communist ideology and international solidarity were now spent, or at least eclipsed by nationalistic differences among the various socialist states. But the Chinese leaders continued to plan for the ultimate

collapse of the capitalist world order, and the triumph of Mao's "Five Principles" over both Soviet revisionism and Western imperialism. In the short term, both ideology and experience counseled flexibility and patience.⁴

As a Chinese, Zhou was only too well aware of his country's humiliation by European powers (including Russia and America) in the nineteenth century, and of the American policy of the Open Door and Japanese aggression and occupation in the twentieth. He understood and adopted the Leninist explanation of imperialism, which predicted that the capitalist powers would continue to exploit China and other colonial nations, and would maintain the world system of trade and politics based on this exploitation, until they were successfully resisted by international socialist forces. China could take its rightful place in the world only through a policy of economic "self-reliance", and by organizing and leading the developing nations of the Third World to resist both Western imperialists and Soviet revisionists.⁵

In Zhou's view, Russian leaders after Stalin were apostates, pursuing a policy of "social imperialism", ostensibly in the name of World Revolution, but really for the purpose of establishing Russian hegemony over the developing nations, tacitly if not explicitly in collaboration with the capitalist powers.⁶ The clear duty of communists throughout the Third World was to resist hegemony of either type, to embrace the principles of self-reliance and non-exploitation, and to build their strength. But socialist strategy, as understood and applied by Mao and Zhou for several decades in China, also taught the fallacy of direct confrontation with the imperialists and class enemies before the proper "correlation of forces", internally and externally, could be brought about; it required tactical flexibility,

including the readiness to make temporary alliances with opponents, either domestic or foreign, when circumstances demanded it.⁷ The important thing was never to lose sight of the long-range goals, nor lose the capability of changing tactics whenever the correlation of forces was favorable

In formulating his policy of rapprochement with the United States in 1970-2, Zhou based his strategy on this socialist logic, rather than on the concept of balance of power as generally understood in the West. Perhaps we should say that Zhou understood balance of power in a way which did not conflict with his commitment to the cause of world revolution and the ultimate victory of communism.

By the late 1960s, Zhou believed that the correlation of forces more and more favored an opening to the U.S. The Sino-Soviet rift, simmering throughout the 1950s, was now public and apparently irreversible. Russian armored divisions threatened China on the north, and there was great unease in Peking about Indo-Russian cooperation in the east.⁸ On the other hand, the new U.S. president, in an article published in Foreign Affairs in 1967, had indicated a willingness to rethink U.S. strategy, and by 1969 the Nixon administration in Washington was clearly seeking an exit from the disastrous war in Vietnam.⁹ In Kissinger's optimistic phrase, the two countries "had begun to regard each other in geopolitical, rather than ideological terms." In reality, Zhou saw, perhaps more clearly than Kissinger did, the decline in American power which the defeat in Vietnam represented, and the opportunity this presented him to redirect American policy in Asia in ways that were less threatening to China's own interests.

Domestic considerations also played a role in Zhou's motivation. Whatever else it

may have done, the Cultural Revolution (which was unleashed by Mao in 1966 for reasons perhaps not dissimilar from those of Stalin in 1937, i e , to use terror to strengthen Party control over the country and to purge the Party itself of unreliaables and opportunists) had by 1969 inflicted significant damage (again, not unlike Stalin's purges) on the country's bureaucratic and military establishments, and caused dismay among China's would-be foreign supporters.¹¹ The Cultural Revolution severely limited China's capability to project its power elsewhere in Asia, simultaneously reducing the risk of a direct conflict with the U S over Vietnam, while making it more urgent for Zhou to seek some political counterweight to balance the growing Soviet threat to China

Thus, rapprochement with the U.S. promised both long and short term dividends Kissinger observed that Zhou had five objectives in 1971: 1) to curb Moscow's "geopolitical ambitions", 2) to escape from the partial isolation that had been caused by the Cultural Revolution; 3) to insure against the possibility of a U.S. - USSR "condominium", 4) to assert China's "rightful place" in world affairs and in international organizations, 5) to come to an understanding with the U.S over Taiwan.¹² But Zhou had to pursue these objectives in ways which were consistent with China's commitment to international socialism. Nor would he allow China to be seen and treated as anything other than a co-equal power Kissinger missed Zhou's resolve to redress the historical record of "unequal treaties."

Among the resources that Zhou could call upon, the most important was his conviction that time and history were inevitably on the side of the Chinese. Whether articulated in ideological terms, or nationalistic ones, Zhou's belief in the power and

unconquerability of China undoubtedly explains the serenity and quiet strength with which he greeted Kissinger, and which so impressed the American emissary on each of his visits ¹³ Zhou also knew that China's military might, supplemented by atomic weapons since 1963, was sufficient to protect against conventional attack by any one of China's adversaries acting alone. This was demonstrated by the performance of Chinese forces in the Korean War, the confrontation with the U S and Taiwan over the offshore islands in the China Strait in 1954, in the war with India in 1962, and in sporadic border clashes with the USSR since 1965. It was precisely to forestall the possibility of concerted action against China that Zhou now pursued a policy of rapprochement with the U S.

Politically, Zhou could also count on mounting support for China's role in the U N. The vote in the General Assembly on the annual Albanian-sponsored resolution to seat China in place of Taiwan, and to exclude Taiwan from any voice in the Assembly, was getting closer every year. In the fall of 1971, the State Department told the White House that it could probably delay China's entry into the U N by one year at most ¹⁴.

In the choice of instruments which he used to pursue his policy, Zhou displayed quite unusual gifts of imagination and subtlety (so subtle on occasion, Kissinger admits, that the initial signals were sometimes missed by the Americans). In the fall of 1969, Zhou dropped the first of several hints in diplomatic conversations with Pakistani and Romanian representatives that an improvement of Chinese relations with the U S might be possible. It was also hinted, at the regular low level meetings which had been taking place between Chinese and American diplomats in Poland since 1955, that China was prepared to entertain a more substantive dialog. These signals were picked up by the Nixon administration, but

the exacerbation of the war in Vietnam, spreading over into Cambodia in May 1970, led to a suspension of these early efforts. In December 1970, Zhou tried again, using a less ambiguous approach - a handwritten note passed to Washington via the President of Pakistan, indicating that Peking would welcome an "personal representative of President Nixon" to come and discuss differences. (A subsequent note, passed through Ceausescu in January 1971, clarified that Nixon himself would be welcome in Peking, "as in Bucharest and Belgrade."¹⁵ Thereafter, the two sides engaged in a continuous exchange of quite unmistakable signals. In February 1971 the U S lifted passport restrictions for any of its citizens who wished to visit China.

Zhou now seized the initiative, and the public imagination, with his brilliant use of "ping-pong diplomacy." At the World Table Tennis Championship in Japan in April 1971, the Chinese team exchanged gifts with the American team, and publicly invited them to come to the People's Republic. There they were welcomed by Zhou Enlai himself in the Great Hall in Peking. Kissinger later commented that "the whole enterprise was vintage Zhou." It signaled that an official U S emissary would be greeted in friendship, and it was the kind of overture which could not be easily rebuffed. But it was also a "subtle warning" that Peking knew how to use public diplomacy to its advantage, and to the discomfort of its adversaries.¹⁶

Zhou also skillfully exploited the American preference, evinced by Kissinger, for handling the initial negotiations in secret, and out of the usual diplomatic channels. Kissinger took almost childish pleasure in duping the State Department about his whereabouts in July 1971, and in excluding Secretary of State Rogers from any role on this and on

subsequent visits to China.¹⁷ Seeing his advantage, Zhou played right along, using this split among the Americans to advance his position concerning "one China" with Kissinger, while isolating the State Department officials who were inclined to argue alternative views about Taiwan.

In the end, it was Zhou's willingness to spend long hours with Kissinger discussing each side's view of the world which convinced Kissinger that the time was ripe for rapprochement, that Zhou and the Chinese leadership were people who understood the big picture, and were ready to pursue "compatible policies."¹⁸

So eager was Kissinger to conclude a deal with Zhou, "to bridge two decades of mutual ignorance" as he put it, that he failed to notice Zhou's utter refusal to make concessions of any kind concerning Taiwan. Indeed, Kissinger notes with satisfaction that both Zhou and Mao repeatedly assured him that "Taiwan is not important."¹⁹ (But if it was so unimportant to them, why did China consistently maintain, most especially the British and Canadians in 1970 and 1971, that any improvement in their bilateral relations hinged on their position towards Taiwan?)²⁰

In the "Shanghai communique" which Kissinger and Zhou drafted in October 1971, and which was issued at the end of President Nixon's visit in February 1972, the U S. acknowledged "that all Chinese on either side of the Straights maintain there is but one China."²¹ This language represented a complete surrender to Zhou's position - a stunning reversal of U S policy and arguably the most complete diplomatic victory ever won by the Chinese in this century.

Thus Zhou achieved, with no significant concessions, his principle objectives

reassurance that there would be no U S -USSR front against China, acceptance by the U.S of the "one China" policy, and rejection of a special or independent status for Taiwan What is more, he did it without renouncing a single one of China's claims to leadership in the world communist movement. This success owes much to Zhou's sense of timing, his skillful diplomacy, and his shrewdness in assessing the willingness of his interlocuters to make concessions But it owes even more to his conviction that the correlation of forces in the late twentieth century had shifted in China's favor. Zhou's readiness to assert China's independence from Moscow, and his ability to win American recognition of China's interests, marked the real coming of age of China's diplomacy, and the end of the era of "unequal treaties" for China

NOTES

- ¹ Henry Kissinger, White House Years (Boston Little, Brown, 1979), pp 685-6
- ² Ibid., pp 685-6, 763-4
- ³ Robert C Keith, The Diplomacy of Zhou Enlai (New York St Martin's Press, 1989), p 194
- ⁴ Ibid., pp 207-8
- ⁵ Ibid., p 183 See also Adam Ulam, Expansion and Coexistence, 2nd edition (New York Praeger, 1974), pp 681-5
- ⁶ Ulam, op cit., pp 682-688, 702-3
- ⁷ Keith, loc cit., p 186
- ⁸ Ulam, op cit., pp 706-7
- ⁹ Keith, loc cit., p 190
- ¹⁰ Kissinger, op cit., p 685
- ¹¹ Ulam, op cit., pp 719-21, 761
- ¹² Kissinger, op cit., p 764
- ¹³ Ibid., p 1073
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p 771
- ¹⁵ Ibid., pp 699-703
- ¹⁶ Ibid., pp 710-12
- ¹⁷ Ibid., pp 758-760, 769-71, 1055
- ¹⁸ Ibid., p 780
- ¹⁹ Ibid., p 1062
- ²⁰ Ibid., pp 708, 771
- ²¹ Ibid., pp 782-30